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**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER  
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**LAOTIAN SECRET WAR EXHIBIT**

**INFORMANT: CHAREON VANNABOUATHONG**

**INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI**

**TRANSLATOR: [NAME UNCLEAR]**

**DATE: FEBRUARY 9, 2008**

**A = ALI**

**T = TRANSLATOR**

**C = CHAREON**

**Tape 08.11**

**Note: “T” will be used to denote Translator’s voice, translating the questions asked of and the responses from the informant.**

A: Okay, this is interview with Chareon Vannabouathong. And this is Mehmed Ali conducting the interview on Saturday February 9, 2008. And also in the room, if you can identify yourself doing most of the translating.

T: [Name unclear]

A: Okay. And thank you all for being here. So Chareon, what we wanted to do was get basically your story as an individual, and how that translates to the history of Laos, and then the immigration of the Laos community here in the city of Lowell.

C: For myself first?

A: Yah.

C: How to come here, or stuff like that?

A: Yah, and I will ask you all sorts of (--)

T: [Unclear] refugee, right?

A: Right. I will ask you all sorts of questions which will help you relay the story. So. So first a little bit of background information. Where and when were you born?

C: I was born in Laos on Khammouan Province. I grow up over there, and I [learn] education over there about six year, six year primary school over there. (A: Okay) And secondary school in Vientiane, Capitol of Laos.

A: So you went to primary and secondary school?

C: Yes, on the year 1967. (A: And um) I study on professional school, Public Work School.

A: Public Works?

C: Yah, Public Works School, (A: Okay) yah, two year, 1970. And then I graduated from there and working with Laos Government. (A: Okay) 1970 to '75 with Laos Kingdom Government. (A: Yah) Yah. After last year of Pathet Laos and they take over the Laos, 1975 I work with them how many year? Five years. Five years to '75 to '80, to 1980. And 1981 I escaped to Thailand, '81, stay on the camp refugee in Thailand in Non Khai; no, Nakun Phnom, Napho Camp for four year lived there until 1985. And then went to [unclear] over there and into Philippines for ESL three months. And then come to United States over here in Lowell first, [unclear] right now.

A: What year did you (--)

C: On the year 1985, yes, '85. (A: '85, okay) I be here June, something like that. June or July, something like that.

A: Okay.

C: Till now.

A: All right. Well that's a quick snapshot of your whole type. So what we're going to do is zero in on some specific things. (C: Yah) So you said you were born in what Province?

C: Khammouan Province.

A: Khammouan, and what was the name of your town, or village?

C: Town is Tha Khaek. (A: Okay) Tha Khaek, and Tha Khaek [village] on the river.

A: Is there a certain neighborhood (C: Yes) within that city that you were born in?

C: Yah, the city, yah, on the city.

A: Is there a certain neighborhood?

C: A certain neighborhood?

A: You know, like this is the Highlands, and the Acre.

C: Yah, no lowland. Lowland, yah, lowland on the side of the river. (A: Okay)  
Opposite on the border with Thailand.

A: Opposite the border? Okay. And what year were you born?

C: 1948.

A: 1948, okay. So you have a big birthday coming up this year? [Chuckles]

C: Yup, this year, my 60. [Laughs]

A: What did your parents do for work?

C: On father right now he die. He work on the official, district official. Was like the city hall, like that, Mayor. Mayor, but not mayor over there, mayor on the small district, on the north over there for how many year? Almost ten year over there, my father.

A: Okay. And how about your mom?

C: My mom, housewife.

A: And what were your parents' names?

C: My father name Mr. Xieng, X I E N G, Ziemg. My mother name Khanh. Khanh is K H A N H. (A: Okay) Yah, Khanh.

A: And did they have surnames?

C: No, no, no surnames.

A: No family name. Just a single name.

C: No, just a single name. Most Laos they don't know the middle name. That's a first name and last name.

A: You know what we'd also like to do is get some genealogy, some family history. So do you know the name of your father's parents? Your grandparents on your father's side?

C: Yah, I just know that my grandparents right, (A: Umhm, on your father's side.) yah, father's side, yah. He works on official on the Kingdom over there. Before, I don't know, maybe many year in the Laos and Thai are together, stuff like that. (A: Umhm. Umhm) French take over from Thailand (A: And separate Laos), divide each side like that. Nakun Phnom and Tha Khaek, the same thing. (A: Yah) And then over there with their own Kingdom Government.

A: And so he worked, he was an officer with the, with the Thai (--)

C: An officer divide the same area, the same a lot of [unclear]. The King, look like the area King, something like that, (A: sure) before like that, area King.

A: But for Thailand?

C: Yah, the same as Laos for [unclear] Mouan. [Unclear] before the small area, (A: Umhm) same like that.

A: And what was your grandfather's name?

C: Name Van. (A: Van?) Van. Use the name, my last name the Van, Vannabouathong, but Bouathong has a brother on Thailand. (A: Okay) They have a brother and young brother, old brother live on that side, and young brother live on the Laos side right now. Use the both last name together, Vannabouathong.

A: So that's how you got your last name?

C: Yah, yah.

A: Was your grandfather and your great uncle?

C: Yah, great uncle, yah.

A: Okay. And how about your grandmother, your father's mother?

C: Mother, I don't know much over there. They don't talk.

A: Do you know her name?

C: Yah, but I don't (--) I know the name, but they die when I young. I don't know much about that.

A: What was her name?

C: Her name, my grandmother for my mother is name [Mui].

A: Okay, that's your mother's mother?

C: Yah, yah, mother's mother. [Unclear] Vietnam over there.

A: Okay.

C: But many year they live in Laos, something like that. [Unclear] something like that, but that's what they say, but I don't know. I didn't, I didn't hear this speaking [unclear] in Laos, something like that, when I young, about five year.

A: So they were from Vietnam?

C: I don't know. Maybe over there many, many year, but I don't know. Maybe fifty year over there, something like that. That's [unclear-sound like enemy]. That's [unclear-sounds like enemy].

A: Yah. Okay, so your mother's mother's name was?

C: [Mui.]

A: [Mui]. And how about your mother's father's name?

C: I don't know. (A: Okay) I don't know.

A: And how about your father's mother's name?

C: Father's mother, I don't really know.

A: You don't know? Okay.

C: They don't tell the story with it.

A: Yah. What did you do as a young kid? Did you work before you went to school, or just went right to school?

C: When I young kid? (A: Yah) I stay the same people, Laos people like that. Live with parents.

T: Do you want me to clarify that? [Translates question to C] He just went to school he said.

C: I just went to school.

A: And how old were you when you started school?

C: Five years.

A: Oh really, yah. Okay. And you had related this already, but you graduated primary and secondary school. (C: Umhm) And then you started school for public works? (C: Yes) And where did you do that?

C: I learn about how to build a bridge. (A: Okay) How to, we build other construction buildings, stuff like that, the public they teach like that. In that time don't have, not yet, Laos not yet engineering school. (A: They don't) Engineering we learn with Thailand and Cambodia, something like that, but my country not yet. After I graduate and then they open the public school.

A: For engineering?

C: For engineering. So I just take a technician, stuff like that, just two year.

A: Okay. And where was that school? In Vientiane?

C: Yah, in on the ministry building. Not school, not the same building when I learn. The teacher, they were on the [unclear] from another section over there. [Comment unclear] come to teach.

A: Okay. So I'm sorry, was it a government school?

C: Yah, government school.

A: Okay. Okay. And you went to that school for two years. (C: Yah) And what year did you graduate that again?

C: 1970.

A: 1970, okay. Leading up to that time did you have any knowledge about the war, and Pathet Laos?

C: Yah, I know over there. Before when I learn technician school, [few words unclear] after graduate, my friend, some friend go to army for pilot, something like that. I thinking, but that time it's [hard] you know, on the '60, '62, no, '68, '67 it's [nice]. Have a lot of war over there. Have a lot of boom over there. And they [open] with young kid in the graduate from school, some high school, and stuff like that, go to pilot.

A: Go to become a pilot?

C: Army. Yah, the pilot army, stuff like that, go to fight the war. (A: Yah) But people not survive. [Words unclear] die. They shot the plane. They use to, they shoot like that, T78. (A: Okay) The plane, their own plane. Not MP15, 16, like that, no. Laos call American give cheap, cheap airplane. [Laughs]

A: The Americans give the cheap, cheap airplanes.

C: Cheap, yah. [Laughs] They don't use the word here, then you're okay. Yah, like that. [Laughing]

A: So did you have any friends, personal friends that went off to the war around '68, '69?

C: Yes, I know, I know much. I know a lot, but, and my friend over there. But for me [words unclear].

A: Yah. Did some of your friends actually get killed?

C: Yah, a lot.

A: Do you remember some of the stories about them?

C: Yah, about they fight with Laos Communist, or Laos, Pathet Laos, stuff like that, Laos Communist over there.

A: [Speaking to translator] You could ask him the question, like a specific story about an individual if he knows.

T: [Translates question to C] He said that he had a lot of friends that went, but never came back, but he doesn't have a specific story for you.

A: Yah, okay. So in 1970 you graduated and then you went to work for the government. And what was your first project that you were working on?

C: The first project I build a road.

A: Build a road? (C: Yes) And where was that road?

C: On the province over there. Road to village, something like that. Four, five Kilomet, something like that. A new road over there.

A: Okay, brand new road?

C: Not a road, [Unclear]

A: Huh?

C: [Unclear]

T: He's saying not a real road like the red sand pavement. You know what I mean?

A: Not like asphalt?

C: Yah, not asphalt, just use on basic on red, red [unclear], something like that. [Unclear] a little bit, something like that.

T: It's like more you know, undeveloped road. It's kind of like a makeshift road.

A: Okay.

T: But they were developing roads in the Province where he lived there.

A: Okay, so it was in your Province.

C: Yah.

A: Okay. And that was, was it Tha Khaek?

C: Yah, Tha Khaek. Tha Khaek, a province over there.

A: And how many (--) Tell us about how that road building operation went. How many people worked on it? What kind of equipment you guys had? How much money do you recall?

C: Over there before [unclear] I go to learn about how to [unclear] the equipment. (A: The equipment?) Yah, equipment about, with that time American [Aid helped] public work over there. They give dump truck. Give [unclear]. Give [unclear], give everything, equipment for the construction over there.

A: The Americans gave that equipment?

C: Yah, over there. They do [words unclear]. They give aid on equipment about, for the, especially for the construction over there; for the road and [unclear] over there.

A: Okay.

C: Give everything over there. (A: Okay) We get a budget. Many, many, many million dollar over there.

A: Really? So when you were building roads there was a lot of other projects happening throughout the country?

C: Yah.

A: Did you ever actually work with American people building the roads?

C: Well no, no. At that time Americans just (--)



T: Just supervise.

C: They would just supervise on the, on the big project. (A: So I mean would) They give, yah, they give the money to the district. The district and equipment. They hire expert for fix the truck, fix the same like that, about a machine shop, something like that. They hire Philippine hire, something like that for teach Laos people you know.

A: Okay. So they would hire Philipinos for example, to teach you guys how to fix the equipment?

C: How to fix, yah.

A: Okay. And so there wasn't that really many Americans there?

C: Not much. They have in the Capital Vientiane over there. (A: Yah, in the Capital) They got a big headquarters over there. They have a lot over there.

A: So how many roads do you think you built? Did you do that for the whole time up until 1975?

C: Yah, all day, every year. Yah. Yes, five years over there. Five years over there. Many connect together. Have a lot.

A: And how about bridges? Did you also build (--)

C: Bridges, yes, some bridges. Look like you know, in country on the side over here, the road go to this river over there. I don't know. The bridge.

A: The bridge near CVS?

C: Yes, stuff like that.

A: Middlesex Street.

C: Middlesex, no. They call Bailey over there, Bailey, the name on the, near the [unclear] over there. They call that Bailey. They use block, block, and then that one is not, that permanent, that's a temporary. They don't use they can take it out.

T: Yah, he's talking about building bridges where they were metal and temporary bridges. (A: Okay) Whereas they just pop them together.

C: And then when they don't need they take it apart, (A: Okay) something like that.

T: Removable bridges.

C: Like the military use, stuff like that.

A: So most of the bridges that you were building were for military use?

C: Yah, yes.

A: Okay. And again the cost of the equipment and the (--)

C: What they call when they don't know that just American give everything over there, just project over there. Maybe I think they have a lot. [Laughs]

A: Any interesting specific stories about either building a road, or building a bridge, or a funny story.

C: I don't know. Just that we ride on the road from Province to Province, stuff like that, and when enemy break down over there and then we rebuild. Stuff like that. Old bridge is too old, when the French build and they take it out, too small and turn rusty. That's why they put the new ones just like that. The big river, or big stream like that. Maybe fifty feet, or a hundred feet, something (--). [Hundred met, hundred me, fifty met], something like that. Maybe (--)

A: Like a hundred meters, or fifty meters?

C: No, maybe 200. Maybe yards, feet, have a lot of feet too. Maybe half on the same river, on the Merrimack River, would be half, stuff like that.

A: Oh, okay. And so you guys would build a bridge, and then the Communist would blow that bridge up?

C: Yah, something like that. When even the war is near over there. The enemy blow up over there. Blow up old one, or the new one, and then build again. Stuff like that.

A: Really? So how many times did that happen?

C: Maybe one time, two times, something like that. They cut the road and don't [unclear] everything us over there.

A: Say it again?

C: Enemy, they want to destroy in the road right. [Protect], you carry everything on the road. You cut like that [unclear], one month, two months, three months, something like that, make a [unclear] for transportation over there.

A: Okay, okay. How would they blow up a bridge for example? Not with airplane, right?

C: No, just the mine. There's a mine [take on the] high on the center, on the put over there, and boom, the bridge come up. The mine, yah. There was dynamite almost.

A: Dynamite, yah. Was that discouraging to you to see your work blown out?

C: But dynamite, after they do it, it didn't go away. They don't leave over there. They left far away, and [A: coughs-cannot hear few words] the insulation, people over there. But [unclear] person, ten person, stuff like that. Cannot, cannot resist it [in the army]. Like [unclear].

T: He's saying, you know, when they would blow up the bridge, what the people would do is they would leave the area, because you know, you're too little to resist the enemies that come in to take over the area.

A: Did you experience any active warfare before 1975? You personally?

C: After '75?

A: Before '75.

C: Before, before '75. Yah [unclear], yah.

A: Could you talk about that?

C: About enemy coming, or the other side?

A: Yah, that impacted you individually.

C: But that time I cannot [unclear] stuff like that. I cannot stay long time over there. Just one day, two day I go. I take a little bit of work, the job over there, do like the supervise, stuff like that. (A: Okay) Either the crew over there, [words unclear]. I just take a look and then come back and [sleep] in the city over there. (A: Okay) [Comment unclear].

T: [Asks question to Chareon in Laos]

C: Every time, every time. Laos anti-government, and Laos own government, and Pathet Laos.

T: Laos against Laos.

C: They have fight together, and then make peace, sometime like that. When on 1972, and then they make, stop the war and make peace. The American drop out from Vietnam, something like that. And then make peace with Laos, and make coalition government, something like that, '72 to '75. (A: Umhm) Yah, [own] government recognize Laos [unclear], or Pathet Laos, bring the soldiers, go to Vientiane, stuff like

that. And then make the people, a revolution in '75 on all Laos, Laos country over there from north to south, every province have strike in their own government. Make, look like the strike, a strike.

A: I'm sorry. Say it again?

C: Make a strike. (A: They made a strike?) Yah strike, strike the government, stuff like that. Before go Laos government, and own government have corrupt some, stuff like that. The people don't like it. Labor don't like it, some time like that. They make a strike.

A: Yup. So who made a strike? The labor?

C: Labor, everything, [almost] people. They want to change the government. They want to [unclear], something like that.

T: He's saying that you know, the anti-government and the government almost in every town, because the government was corrupt and they were being backed by somebody else. (A: Yah)

C: [People the war, people strike, strike back on] their own government. Their own (--) They have to work together, right, and both sides divided. And then their own party, they have people the war, own party. They have how many Laos take independence from France 1945, live over there. They had the war, they don't like the Royal, right, Royal. The Royal.

T: Oh, the war chief, you know, the Royalists.

A: Royalists, okay.

C: Royalists, something like that. They have revolution together that time like that. Many, many, many times (--)

T: [Asks question to Chareon on Laos]

C: [Unclear] Savann, Vientiane, stuff like that. Khammouan, it's a small, small Province. Don't have a big [unclear] like that.

T: He's saying his hometown didn't go through that, the revolution anti-government, but it's the big cities that mainly did it.

A: And what year would this be?

C: Almost the Laos Government collapsed, almost twenty-years, 1975. Every year in our province we grow, grow up over there.

A: Okay. So I just want to ask you again, you weren't involved in any direct conflict?

C: On the government or on (--)

A: Before 1975 did you experience any battles?

C: Yah, sometime they do, it's not good for many people. [Unclear] people strike like that.

A: Okay, okay.

C: I almost [unclear] with boss. [Comment unclear]. It's the wrong way [unclear]. I don't like it. I on the side of the labor, on the side of my crew, stuff like that.

A: Okay, okay. I think it might be better to get, just a better capsule of the story if we could translate. Would that be all right? (C: Oh yah) I think it might just be better for you to answer in Laos, and then have you do the translation. I think it will come out a little bit better. (C: Okay) So you were saying because the government was corrupt, you weren't necessarily in support of everything that was happening. So you were participating in the strikes?

C: Yah.

A: And tell us about your participation in that.

C: Something like that, my boss don't pay money, don't pay the salary to people, stuff like that.

A: Yah, why don't you say it in Laos and then [name unclear] will translate. So we get the kind of more, better pronunciation for the person that's going to do the transcribing.

T: '72 to '73 the government was really bad about you know, you could almost say ripping people off. Like people would work and wouldn't get paid for it. So you know, that's when lot of people would rise against the government, because you know, they want their money or they want to get paid. Even though he was a government employee, he was a government public works employee, you know, the government over there is really corrupted. So they pay them if they want to. If they don't, they don't. It's really issues specific for him I think with the revolution. So he wasn't totally against the government, but in certain cases he was. Yah, he's saying that he wasn't totally against the government, but on certain issues where they would do wrong to the people, that's when he would you know, be against them and you know, do his actions or up rise.

A: Yah. So ask him, tell us some specific instances about strikes, or your participation in that.

T: There's not too much, but just that one specific where they don't pay, and they don't respect the workers. You know, they're pretty much keeping the money, greedy. You know, so they don't respect him, or the other workers. And that's mostly what the up rise is about, is that they were pretty much taken advantage of the working people, because they were getting money. You know, they were funded (A: Right) elsewhere. But then they wouldn't pass along, I think the funding, where it's supposed to be.

A: Were you ever punished or discriminated because of your support of the workers?

T: No, no real you know, retaliation. No retaliation, just you know, they would strike until they got what they want. And then when they got what they want, then you know, that's when they would [talk].

A: So the government did finally pay you guys, all the workers?

C: I represented for the labor. My laborers, something like that. I fought. [Unclear] the crew have troubles? Okay, I fight for you. Support, same like that. [Unclear] to care for them, same like that.

T: I asked him had you ever been like brother against brother, or father against son, you know, one's for one side, and (--)

C: [Unclear]. Somebody, I don't know. [Laughs]

A: So you actually acted as a representative to, for the workers to try to get funds? (C: Umhm) How long was the period where you guys weren't getting paid?

C: About two or three months, maybe late, something like that. They late one month, two months, something like that. I don't know, maybe they take money before [unclear], take money to gamble, they don't have money to pay like that. Laos, [unclear] they do as cash, they give, take, something like that. They don't have the cash on the bank you can't give to people. I cannot withdraw from the bank to pay the people, pay the labor, pay the everything. Everything use cash.

T: So there's no credit, everything was just based on cash. And I guess what he's saying is the government was really corrupt again, and they would take the money. They might gamble it on some other stuff. And there was no accountability on the government. It's just who was in charge can do anything they want, you know.

A: Do you think this is one of the reasons why the Communists were able to overthrow the government?

C: Yah, same like that. They had [unclear] for Laos Communists, they have benefit. [Unclear]. If you work [unclear] you go to my side, it's good. Then like that.

A: So they were able to use that against the government, right, as propaganda?

C: Yah, sometimes I say oh yah, [unclear], something like that. I don't know what [unclear]. After that, after I take that maybe contract together something like that.

T: Yah, so basically a lot of bribery was going on, you know, sides taking sides. And basically the government you know, had its issues. And that's when I guess the Communists would come in and try to get everybody to overthrow that government, and pretty much take it over. And they were using bribery, saying, "You come with me, I'll take care of you. I'll give you more than what they give you." Stuff like that.

A: So in December of 1975 the Communists took full control over the government, right? What did you think about that?

C: Right now I work on the small official. They don't like and I work over there. It's not a soldier. They don't have contract too much.

A: It's not a what?

C: It's not soldier. In soldier we conflict, right? They have gun everything. They [conflict] with new government. I work on the private, public works the same when the teacher tell me everything, not [unclear]. They follow with them! Stuff like that.

T: So he was part, he was part of the government. So he wasn't fighting for, it's just he had to follow wherever the winning party is, you know what I mean, because he worked under the city, along with the teachers, and other public employees. Where whoever won, that's the one they would work, yah.

C: It's soldier. It's soldier that we take to re-education to the seminar, they re-education, something like that.

A: Re-education for the soldiers?

C: Almost, yah, for soldiers, for police, stuff like that.

A: Yah, but not you.

C: Not you, for small, small staff. They don't use small (--)

A: Small staff.

C: Yah, they want [unclear].

T: His city again, is a little small, it was smaller than the bigger cities, but the re-education and things like that were happening in cities like Vientiane and Savann, and Savannakhet, and stuff like that.

A: So the day before and the day after the Communist took power, no real change for Chareon Vannabouathong? Why don't you speak in Laos and we'll translate?

T: In '75 was when it happened you know, that until '80 [they come] from Thailand, you know, was cutting off resources. (A: Okay) You know, so it's hard to eat, you know, hard to find [unclear], hard to make money. You know, because when it went Communist, you know, that region, the other countries said, "No, we're not supporting the Communists." You know, before, before it was Communist you know, they would get aid for Thailand, America, and other countries.

C: [Unclear] People cannot. But my country land lock. No see, no anything. (T: Land locked] Land lock. You can't, can't go out.

A: Yah.

C: [You can't].

A: Yah. So China and Vietnam didn't really help Laos?

T: So he said when, right when the Communist party took over you didn't hear too much about who was helping, who wasn't, who was backing, you know what I mean? The party that's in charge. Obviously someone had to be backing them, but he doesn't know for sure. He didn't hear, because they just tell you what to do and that's it. And the people that didn't want to stay, they just, they leave because they're scared of you know, the anti you know, government, or whatnot, they would leave. Like he left in you know, '81. You know, but people were, didn't know what was going on. So that's why they were jumping ship. You know, they didn't want to get killed or anything.

A: When you said when the Communists took over in Thailand, and some of those places weren't supporting, was it harder to work on rebuilding roads and bridges, because of lack of material?

C: Like in that time everything collapsed. No nothing. No [fill], no everything, no equipment, stuff like that. Everything stopped.

T: Yah, everything stopped. Once the Communists took over in '75 no one was funding anything, no resources coming in. So they had no resources to build any roads, no resources to do anything. Everything just stopped. Like collapse of the government.

A: So what did you do on a daily basis then for that five or six year period?

T: Everything was basically only that you know, you take care of yourself. You've got to grow your own food. You can't rely on it. You have your own animals. Basically you take care of your family and that's it, because you're not going to get any other resources. You know, stores aren't getting anything. [Sound of chimes in background]



People that are selling stuff can't sell it anymore. So you pretty much have to live off the land.

A: Okay. And is that what you did?

T: If you didn't have like land to plant rice and stuff on, you had it hard, you know, because if you didn't have anything to grow your own stuff. That's what he did. He had his own land. So you know, you were able to grow the rice, the vegetables to eat and stuff like that. But if you didn't have your own land, then you got to go and ask somebody else to help you out, you know?

A: So technically were you still working for the government, but not really doing any work?

C: No, nothing.

A: And did you get a paycheck from them?

T: They only give you a little. It's really insufficient, you know, because the Communist government just pays everybody the same rations. But you know, like he said, if you didn't have your own land to grow the rice, you couldn't live off the stuff, the money that the government was giving you.

A: Um, wow. Was any of your friends or family impacted in a very tough way because of this policy?

T: Everybody was in the same position.

A: So any time during the time that the Communist were in power were you scared for your own self?

T: Yah, he was afraid for himself. There was a lot of you know, whoever was against the government, they'll come and get you. You know, so he was afraid for his life and for his family because (C: They don't trust us), yah, they're already, they're already you know, like let's take everybody out and put them in jail if, or kill them if they don't agree with us. So when they took over everybody, not just him, but everybody was afraid for their lives, because you know, it's like a witch hunt, you know. So if they hear anything that you say bad about the government, then they'll come and get you. Yah, since he was part of the old government, working for the old government, you know, he talked about sleepless nights. You know, he's just wondering when they're going to come and get him, because anybody can say anything to the government you know, and they'll come get you. They won't even ask if you're lying or not! You know, if anybody dislikes you, they'll tell the government, or rat you out in that case, and just say, you know, hey, he's against the government and they'll come and get you. But he said that there's nights that you know, you don't go to sleep, because you don't know if they're going to come get you at night in the bed.

A: What made you specifically decide to leave Laos and escape?

T: Yah, the reason he came over is because people were already starting to talk, you know, accusing him of certain things. And he did not, he didn't want to risk just staying there and the government coming to take him away. So him and his family packed up and they just left.

A: What were they accusing him of?

T: Being with the government. In '79, '80 was when a lot of people defected from Laos, because it was unstable time. The old government (--) The new government didn't trust anybody, and therefore they were taking people out. But in '79 and '80 it was the biggest, you know, defect year for the Laotian country, because everybody just wanted to get out, because too many stories about people getting killed for nothing. And everybody didn't want to risk it. So that's why they let and went to the refugee camps in Thailand.

A: Was there something specific that he thought though that, decided you know, okay, you know next week, or tomorrow we're going to leave.

T: Yah, he said that there was an argument he had and they were accusing him of you know, being anti-communist. You know, so that's why you know, he wanted to leave.

A: Okay. And who was the argument with?

T: Coworkers that weren't together. Fighting over, fighting over like, work. You know, so he got into arguments. You know, because there's not much work over there.

A: Okay.

T: So people, you know, his coworkers you know, and him you know, didn't get along as far as that goes.

A: Like they were trying to get (--)

T: Basically they were trying (--) These coworkers wanted more money, more power, just more everything. And they would be willing to tell on someone to get that.

A: Okay.

T: Some people, some people were like that, you know?

A: So like for example there was some work, and they were trying to exclude you (C: Yah) in order to get that work. And they were using anything to drum up against you?

T: Right.

A: Tell us about your actual experience leaving? How did you escape?

T: Yah, it was really difficult to get here, because you didn't know who were your allies, and who were the enemies. And since it wasn't just him alone, if it were him alone he could go and just swim across the river and get to Thailand, but he had kids, five children that you have to worry about, and a wife, getting across the river. So back in the old days, you know, crossing the river, if they weren't your friends, or allies, they will kill you and just throw you in the river.

A: And take your money or something?

T: Take your money and then stuff like that, because they were with the communist government. But you know, he had to check many routes, many ways of getting over to make sure it was a safe way to get over. And now like I said, you know, with kids it makes it a lot harder. And you never know. And if you go your whole family (--) If you go the wrong road they can arrest you right there and put everybody in jail.

A: And so how did he figure it out, and what was the like exact route of your departure?

T: He had to go, first have somebody help them. You know, because you have to have somebody that has already did this before, know which way to go to not get caught. And they would only go in the area that they know, or have been before. So you basically had to hire a guide. And if that guide was the enemy, or communist, they would kill you, take you money, but if you know, you have to pick the right guy that will take you across to Thailand. See you got to cross the river.

A: Yah. Okay. So I understand the kind of, the how it, how it happens, but what I'd like to (T: What city?) do is zero in, yah, zero in specifically you know, they walked through jungle, they got on a boat, they paid this guy, they paid that lady, they brought the kids at once, or you know. So the very specifics of how they left.

T: They pay a guide that had a boat in a town called Hinboun. That's where they hired the boat man to take them across the river.

A: And they take everybody at once? Or the whole family?

T: The whole family. He was, him and his family were in Vientiane and they told the people they're just moving the house, the household down the river. That's why they're taking the boat. So what they did was they got in the boat at Vientiane and went down river. And then when they got to the town that they were supposed to be going to, that's when they crossed. Because if they know that you're going across the river, they'll arrest you right there, and they won't let you go. (A: Okay) So you have to look and lie to them, and say, "Hey, I'm just moving my family down river a little bit, to another part of the country." But once you get down there you cross.

A: So the guy that did that for you, how did he always survive? Or did he leave at the same time?

T: Yah, he couldn't come back.

A: So he, he left Laos at that same time? (T: Yah) Any other people on the boat with you? Was it crowded?

T: Yah, no, they can come back as long as no one knew. You know what I mean? They live on the river? (C: further explains) Oh okay. He said that you have to buy the boat. They won't take you across. You have to buy the boat, and then when you get over to Thailand the boat is just there.

C: And then in Thailand they take the boat. [Laughs]

T: Thailand takes the boat.

A: Thailand, they like to take everything, don't they?

C: Yes. Thailand soldier, [unclear] soldier take everything [completes comment in Laos].

T: Oh yah. He said if you cross, if you're a Laotian and you cross by yourself, the Thai army will kill you because they think you're Communist. But in his case, and everybody else's cases, you have kids with you and your wife with you, so that kind of is a sign that you're defecting, they'll just put you in jail until they can place you in a concentration camp, I mean the refugee camp. They took all the papers, you know, like his papers for school, his papers for his family, they take them and they never return them; pictures and everything.

A: Really? Why would they take that stuff?

C: I don't know. They say the Communists, it go to them.

T: Yah, they didn't, they didn't [take them back]. Laos people, you know, the money is different, the Laos money and the Thai money. They kept the Baht. So they didn't take the money really, because we didn't have much. They just put you to jail until the refugee camp.

A: How long did you guys stay in jail? And were you, was the whole family in jail?

T: Yah, about a week they give you to the police. Yah, they pretty much go over all of your stuff first before they can send you out. You know, they verify you know, kind of like make sure you're not Communist and things like that, before you can go. So about a week to two weeks in the jail.

C: Two weeks.

A: And then which refugee camp did you go to?

C: Napho.

A: Napho?

C: Napho Nakon Phnom.

A: And how long did you stay in the camp?

C: Four years.

A: Ooh wow! What did you do on a daily basis in the camp?

C: Do everything over there [laughs] for survive.

T: Yah, even in there, there was the haves and have nots. In concentration camps you have to work, do anything, you know, hustle to do any little thing that's going to bring money back and then help your family buy the things they need. Because even though in refugee camp, you know, they give you food and stuff, you still need money to survive in there. And that's why he had to work, you know. He said, splitting firewood for people, selling stuff for people, anything you can do to make some money to survive.

A: Did you have multiple interviews in order to get processed through the camp?

T: The one that he went to just opened up. So they didn't have the process in there. It's kind of just life for them to stay right there. You know what I mean? Just wait, try to wait it out. Yah, he crossed in a different area, which put him in a different camp. Now if he would have crossed a little bit near Ubon, the processing takes a couple of months for you to get over here. But since he crossed in the other area, he went to that camp that was just established, the new camp, and it takes a long time for that camp to get up and process. They do all the ones by Ubon, but the city of Ubon, Thailand first. So he hit bad luck and had to stay for four years over there.

A: Obviously you didn't know that when you crossed, right? (C: Yah, right) Did they ask you, did they give you any problems because you had worked for the government, as part of your interview process? Because technically you had worked for the Communist Government right, for a couple of years?

T: Yah, they asked him specifics like were you involved with the government, and so and so. And he would just answer that he was only a worker for them. You know, any thing that you know, they said to do as a worker, he would just do the work, verses you know, controlling any aspect of the government. He never, you know, he didn't control any aspect. He was just a worker. And that's how most of the interview went.

A: Umhm, umhm. So you went into the camp in 1981? (C: Yes) And you got out in 1985. (C: '85) And who was your sponsor?

T: It's a church and his brother that helped sponsor him over here. His brother that lives here now.

A: Do you remember the name of the church?

C: I don't know. I don't know, forgot. I never stop over there, long time you know.

T: He thinks it was, it wasn't a specific church. It was more like the Christian Foundation, or something, (A: Okay) but he doesn't recall which one.

A: So why did you come to Lowell?

T: His brother was the one who vouched for him and said that he's over here, and mostly likely he said he can help him out if anything. So the government usually tries to send you to where your family is, you know, so that you won't burn the system.

A: Umhm, yah. And so your brother was here in Lowell?

C: Yah, right now he moved to Florida.

A: Okay.

C: Yah, cause the name change, but the same last name.

A: Yah. So do you know why your brother came to Lowell?

C: Yah, my brother he escaped [continues in Laos].

T: So you know, he left, but you know, he's the one like he said, vouched for him to come to Lowell at that time.

A: Does he know why his brother came to Lowell? Not him, but his brother.

T: Oh, the church [stuck] him here.

A: Okay. And the brother, the brother's name?

C: [Suksa]

T: [Suksa]

C: [Suksa] Vannabouathong.

A: Okay

T: [Suksa] Vannabouathong.

C: A brother [name unclear] Vannabouathong live over here.

T: He said it's not really his brother, it's a brother of his, (C: Cousin) yah, it's his cousin. But you know, they have the same last name.

A: Um, okay, okay.

T: And that's why he was able to vouch for him.

A: And that's on your father's side? Your cousin on your father's side?

C: Yah, father side, yes.

A: Okay. And so you came to Lowell. What was your first impression of Lowell?

T: He said that when he came here it was all new to him, and everything looked the same. So he didn't know anything from anything.

A: [Chuckles] Did you like the weather?

C: Yes, but we live a long time like that, so I like it. [Laughs]

T: Yah, he's saying that you know, the conditions he lived in, anywhere was better.

C: I stay everywhere, don't like same like this. This is better for me!

A: So how long was it before you started working, or did you go to school to learn English, or?

T: He said that before he was going to leave to come here, you know, he started learning the English, ah, language a little bit more. And then he went to Philippines for three months to learn the ESL Program. (A: Okay) And he said it was a little bit easy on him because he had studied French before. (A: Okay) So he kind of, you know, used that training to learn English a little bit. When he got here he learned ESL at high school here in Lowell.

A: At Lowell High?

T: Lowell High.

C: Lowell High, evening, evening class over there.

T: Night class. Intermediate, but not advanced, because he just got here. So.

A: And then how long by the time you arrived before you actually started working?

T: He said when he first got here it was around four months before he actually started working. He was getting [assistance] from the government, you know, welfare and aid, and it wasn't enough to pay the rent, take care of the kids, and things like that. So he went to work. [Asks Chareon what company]

C: Macaroni, Prince Macaroni.

A: Oh you worked for Prince Macaroni?

C: Yah, Prince Macaroni. That's nine, six to nine months, something like that, and then layoff, because I don't know much English. And they say, "Oh, you don't understand English much. I layoff you."

T: And so they laid him off. He started, '86, '86 to '87 is when he worked there. (C: '86 to '87) His hourly salary was around \$7.25.

C: Seven or eight months, something like that, not one year.

T: He got laid off for not being able to communicate.

C: They say I don't understand English. Yah, I show I don't have, it's not in my language. I tell them. [Laughs]

A: What did you do at Prince?

C: Mechanic.

A: Mechanic?

C: Yah. Before I know. In Laos the same I work over here, a basic mechanic. They want driver, I don't like it. I can't drive. [Unclear] anything. I tell them I don't like it. The opening for mechanic. My brother sponsor to me.

T: His sponsor, his cousin was working there already. So he knew that he was a mechanic. So he took him to go work over there with them at Prince Macaroni. And you know, he tried to help him out but eventually he got laid off. That's how he got the job, was through his cousin that sponsored him over here.

A: Umhm. What did you do for work after that?

C: After layoff?



A: After Prince, yah.

T: Yah, so for five, six months he basically took his sons and they went and collected cans to get the refund on them. And then he would you know, take chickens, and the people would give him chickens. (C: From the farm) He would have to you know, boil them and then take the feathers off and everything, and then return it to them. So they would sell the chickens, but he would make the money doing the labor of getting them prepped and ready.

A: Which farm was that?

C: Farm from Groton.

A: Groton.

C: Yah, Groton, a farm over there far way. Yah, they went out and drive the car in Groton.

T: Groton. (C: Groton) Blood Farm. He's thinking it's Blood Farm in Groton.

A: Okay.

T: He said it's an hour away, but it's like (--)

A: If you drive slow it's fifty-minutes. It can be. If you drive slow it can be fifty minutes, but it's more like (T: Twenty-five) forty, forty minutes, thirty-five, forty minutes to Groton. No, maybe not an hour.

C: Nobody there, only a note, that's it.

A: I can get there in ten [words unclear]. [All laugh] What did you do after that?

C: Bradford Industries.

T: Bedford?

A: Bradford!

T: Bradford Industries. Yah, and he's been there since, you know, as a mechanic for twenty plus years.

A: Okay. And how did you get that position? How did you hear about it?

T: His cousin also went. His cousin left Prince Macaroni, and he told him that they're opening a new company, and he wants him to come with him to go work.

A: And how have you, how has your experience been at Bradford?

C: Me know a little bit about [continues in Laos].

T: He said when he first interviewed at Bradford you know, he told him "I can fix a little bit. I know a little bit. And I don't speak that good English, but I can learn as time goes on." And he said it's been good to him because he's still there now.

A: And what year did you start?

C: '87.

A: '87.

C: February '87.

A: Okay, so (T: Twenty-one years) twenty-one years now. Good. That's good. Tell us a little bit, and we're almost finishing up here, tell us a little bit about some of your community activities, like the Laos Family Mutual Association, and what else, volunteer stuff you've been active with.

T: Yah, he started Laos Family Mutual in 1987. And that's because the Laos American Association collapsed. (A: Okay) And he's been involved with them ever since. But even now they don't have any money to, you know, from the grants of government. So, but (--)

C: City of Lowell give two, two year, three year.

T: And it was only for the City of Lowell. You know, the money they were getting was for just the City of Lowell.

C: We borrow \$10,000 for a year for hire staff to do the job. Take people for to hospital, something like that.

T: So, but now you know, he still helps out but there's no money in the Laos Family Association that's going to you know, make them a big organization. But you know, when people need something they still call him and he helps out with them.

A: What do you know about the history of the first organization and why did it collapsed?

T: From what he heard, the old organization is, they were getting bigger grants back then, like \$40,000 to \$50,000, but I guess they weren't, either they weren't spending it on the right things, or they were misappropriating the funds and not keeping track of them. So the government started cutting down the funding to these organization because of the

misspent, misuse or you know, not keeping track of the funds. (A: Correct) Who knows what they spent it on, but (A: Yah) that's why that other organization started, was Laos Family, is because you know, of the collapsed and of course there's not enough funding. They cut down the funds because they you know, from what he said, he said, you know, they're like okay, people are starting to learn English now, and things like that, so they know a little bit more.

A: Where was the earlier organization located? Was it at, did they have a site, or was it run out of a house like the Laos Family?

T: He said it's kind of near where he works now, near Bradford.

A: Was it where the CMAA, (C: Yah) the old CMAA Building?

C: Yah, together, something like that.

A: Yah, what was the address?

C: They rent for the CMAA, they rent for the Laos Committee together.

A: Perry Street?

C: Yah, yah, Perry Street, yah.

A: 125 Perry Street.

C: Yup, yup, yup. After that [gone].

A: How many years was the organization around, the earlier one?

C: For the people come here, for the Laos come here. They work over there on the Highland with the Laos (A: International Institute) yah, International Institute (A: On High Street?) High Street over there.

A: 79 High Street.

C: Before they work together. And Laos, before coming, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia went to the Intern...the [unclear] over there. I don't know the name [unclear]. There on High. After that they get money and then separate. (A: Separate) Yah.

A: Okay.

T: Yah, they received different grants I guess, and then they separated.

C: Maybe [unclear]. [Laughs]

A: Yah, no. That's good. Just one question back to Laos. Did you know anything about the American Bombing Campaign of Laos?

C: Yah, I know just, I grew up over there. I know over there the same from, I have a [unclear] from [unclear] government, and I know for myself. American make war in Laos, they call war, Indochina War. Right? (A: Right) Then start from 1964. (A: Okay) '64 to '72, and American peace with Vietnam. American then make peace with Vietnam. That year Laos look like the victim with the war, because Secret War.

A: The Secret War.

C: Yah, [unclear]. [Unclear] war, the American with Vietnam. (A: Umhm) Cambodia and Laos, the Secret War. Yah. Bomb in Laos [unclear] two things. Bomb in Laos, Laos side Vietnam, Laos Communist. (A: Umhm) And then bomb, Vietnam use Laos land and go to Ho Chi Ming (A: Ho Chi Ming Trail?), yah, Ho Chi Ming Trail from [Xiang Khuang], over here, can I have the map over there. Yah, from [Xiang Khuang] over here, [repeats]. They go North Vietnam, go over there, go to the Laos over here, to Salavan, and go to South Vietnam. But American bomb the bomb through there on the side of the Ho Chi Ming Trail over there. Have a lot. Have a lot in [Xiang Khuang] and Salavan on the south. They did, they have a lot.

A: Those are the two provinces where a lot?

C: Have a lot them and they order the [province]. The stuff like that. I know maybe three million tons. (A: Three million tons) Three million tons, (A: Of bombs) drop the bombs. (A: Wow) Yah, have a lot. The same person, before Laos [unclear], the same one person get one ton.

A: Oh, each person has the equivalent of one ton of bombs?

C: Yah, each person the stuff like that. Yah, one ton of bombs.

A: Wow, that's crazy, huh.

C: They do that how many year? '70, '62 to like eight year. All right. Maybe eight year [unclear] over there. Right now I, they say when I live on the Laos [unclear] over there. I went to for make Laos, Laos tell me make a road to the other side before [unclear], right. The people they come back over there, they say have a lot of bombs not explode.

A: No exploded.

C: Yah.

A: This is the time when you were building roads for the government?

C: Yah.

A: Okay.

C: But not, [unclear], the other side. The guy, they separate. They separate around over here. They separate from north to south like this. (A: Yup) One side, which side (--) This side the Communist take. One side the Kingdom Government take. (A: Right) And two third, two third the Laos Communist take.

A: Really, two thirds of the country, wow.

C: Yah two thirds. That's one [unclear] Laos. (A: Yup) Laos Kingdom over there, and on the side the river, stuff like that.

A: So when you guys were building roads you talked to some people that said they were trying to (--)

C: Yah, ask people, people say, oh they have a lot. After, after '72 they make peace. No bomb, no everything. The people go back to, to own refugee. [Unclear] go back to (--)

A: To their original areas.

C: Yah, original area over there. That time I went up over there.

A: Where did you go? What Province?

C: The same Province, on the Kham Muang Province, by the side over here. Kham Muang Province maybe over here. [Must be looking at map] See? (A: Yup) I go up over here, over Ho Chi Ming Trail over there. (A: Okay) I look over the [unclear], everything over there. They have big jungle, big everything over there.

A: Why don't you say that in Laos so we can get that translated. Give us your full story as best you can recall it. So you went up and you saw (--)

C: Saw the bomb (A: Yah), stuff like that? (A: Yah) But I saw the bomb, but just I hear that they say it, the people say it, stuff like that. (A: Okay) When I grow up over there I just saw they covered the bomb.

A: They covered the bomb?

C: Yah, [all speaking together, cannot comprehend].

T: The bomb shells, like unexploded bomb shells, because a lot of the bombs didn't explode. And that's why people left, because they're afraid the bombs are going to explode any time. He said they asked him to make a road to go up to where they are, but be careful, because you know, there was a lot of unexploded bombs. And I think he might be talking about land mines too, you know.

C: Over Ho Chi Minh Trail over there.

A: So were you able to complete that road?

C: Yah.

A: No big booms for you?

C: No.

A: [Chuckles]

T: You see in some documentaries they show you know the unexploded bombs, they make boats of the bomb. It's aluminum. Just the shell that they use, the aluminum shell, they make pots, everything with it, you know, boats and things like that. So.

A: Well Chareon, any final story or any final thought that you want to share with us today?

T: He said if he would have it his way, you know, last year 43 bombs went off and 88 people were injured. You know, not to, not to know how many died. Yah, like 43 bombs went off, 88 people died. And you know he's hoping, hurt too. And he's hoping that some kind of funding you know, can go to Laos to help them get the bombs out and the mines out of there so that you know, these bombs and mines don't hurt any of the kids playing in the areas now. He said right now Japan and Sweden donate a lot of funding to help with those removals, and the United States doesn't help as much as they would, because it's their bombs he feels like you know, the United States should be helping out more in removing the you know.

C: [Unclear] unexplode. [Unclear] X?

A: Unexploded Ordinance, UXO, yah.

C: Yah, right.

T: Yah, so that's the team that goes in and takes these out.

C: Take money.

A: Have you ever called George Bush to ask him to take away the bombs?

C: No.

[Both chuckle]

A: I want to thank you very much for sharing all your stories. Okay. Kop Chai.

C: Kop Khun.

A: Kop Khun.

C: Kop Chai. Kop Khun [unclear].

A: Thank you young man.

**Interview ends**